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SUBJECT: HCMC POLICE DISCUSS RECENT TIP RING BUST

REF: 05 HCMC 1299

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1. (SBU) Summary: On April 18, PolOffs met with HCMC Ministry of Public Security officials to review details of a late March police sweep against an international Trafficking in Persons ring that operated in HCMC and the Mekong Delta. Police confirmed that 39 young women from southern Vietnam rescued during the sweep were intended to be sold to brothels in Malaysia. They are working with Malaysian authorities to identify and rescue the 100 other women the ring reportedly trafficked to Malaysia. The MPS officials indicated that the ring also may have been involved in trafficking women onwards to Taiwan or other Asian destinations. The MPS officials acknowledged that they are working to strengthen shortcomings in their approach to TIP and said they are looking for greater cooperation with the United States in this regard. End Summary.

Background

2. (SBU) In late March, the HCMC press reported that HCMC Ministry of Public Security (MPS) officials and police representatives of the Mekong Delta province of Tien Giang had raided five locations in HCMC and arrested ten individuals suspected of running an international trafficking in persons ring to Malaysia. The press reported that 40 women who were about to be trafficked to Malaysia under the guise of export laborers were rescued.

Meeting with MPS

3. (SBU) On April 18 PolOffs met with MPS Colonel Hoang Tan Viet, Deputy Director of Criminal Police, and senior TIP investigators at the MPS Southern Command headquarters. Viet noted that TIP is an increasing concern for Vietnam, both at the national level and in the provinces. He said that, at a minimum, "tens of thousands" of Vietnamese women and children have been trafficked over the years. The vast majority of the victims are from poor rural areas; in southern Vietnam, they are mostly from the Mekong Delta and Tay Ninh Province. A small proportion are trafficked into prostitution networks in HCMC and other major urban centers, but the bulk are trafficked overseas. Cambodia, Thailand and China are the principal destinations, but many women and children also are trafficked to Hong Kong, Malaysia, Macau, and Taiwan, for prostitution and forced labor in those countries or to be sold and smuggled to other destinations. Viet said that, according to MPS statistics, from 1999-2002, Vietnamese police had prosecuted 1,818 criminal cases of trafficking nationwide, involving 3,118 suspects. He did not offer more recent statistics in his presentation.

14. (SBU) Viet confirmed that HCMC, Tay Ninh and Tien Giang provincial police had conducted coordinated raids in HCMC to break an international TIP ring. Police apparently learned of the operation from a few victims who had escaped forced prostitution in Malaysia, returned to the Mekong Delta and filed a police complaint. During the raids in HCMC, ten persons were arrested, including Tsii Sien, a Taiwanese citizen (spelling of name as given). However, police officials believe the group is much bigger. They are pursuing additional suspects, including a Malaysian suspect still at large. (Note: Colonel Viet gave us the names, dates of birth, and addresses of the 10 arrestees, which we have passed to the Consular Section for possible entry into the CLASS visa lookout system. End Note.) In the course of the investigation, MPS confiscated 51 passports, 57 family registration books, 33 Vietnamese ID cards, 21 birth certificates, mobile phones, motor bikes, and Vietnamese, Taiwanese, Malaysian and U.S. currency. The authenticity of the civil documents is being analyzed by MPS forensic units. Viet noted parenthetically that forgery and document counterfeiting operations in Vietnam have become more sophisticated.

15. (SBU) According to Viet, 39 Vietnamese women, aged 16 to 28, were rescued during the police operation. They all were from poor families in the Mekong Delta or Tay Ninh Province. They apparently were lured to HCMC by promises of lucrative overseas work. Viet said that they were not/not aware that, once in Malaysia, they would be sold to brothels to become sex slaves. In HCMC, the girls had been housed together while gang members secured passports and documentation for transshipment to Malaysia. All the women have now been returned to their families.

16. (SBU) Viet said that the ten suspects admitted having trafficked at least 100 Vietnamese women to Malaysia. Upon arrival in Malaysia, members of the ring would shop the victims from brothel to brothel until a sale was made, a process that

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took about a week. Given the arrest of a Taiwanese national, the MPS suspects that some of the victims may have been resold to Taiwan; MPS is working with Taiwanese authorities to follow up. MPS also is working with Malaysian Interpol to try and identify, rescue and repatriate victims in Malaysia. Viet was hopeful that authorities might rescue the bulk of the women trafficked by this ring; he noted that, unlike the trafficking of Vietnamese women in mainland China, where women are widely distributed across rural China, in Malaysia, the women appear to have been sold to brothels in a relatively small urban area.

Taiwanese Brides, Tourism and Adoption

17. (SBU) Viet said that authorities are looking very carefully at the phenomenon of Vietnamese women marrying Taiwanese men (reftel). He said that, to the best of his knowledge, all marriage arrangements inside Vietnam are proper and legal, even though brides' families are paid up to USD 3000 during the process. However, the Colonel said that he is concerned over some reports that, once in Taiwan, women were sold into forced labor or prostitution. (He did not elaborate.)

18. (SBU) Viet said that the MPS also believes that young Vietnamese women are befriended by traffickers, invited to travel overseas "for fun," and then lured to Taiwan, Macau, Malaysia, and Hong Kong where they are forced into prostitution. He also indicated that Vietnamese women are going to Singapore to practice prostitution, but did not state that these women were trafficked.

19. (SBU) Viet noted that MPS also is investigating child trafficking via adoptions. Police have information suggesting that children have been legally adopted by foreigners in Vietnam, but have been sold overseas. Viet said that no U.S.

adoptions were involved. He stated that MPS officials would be willing to hold follow-up discussions with relevant ConGen staff on the adoptions fraud issue.

Looking Ahead to More Cooperation?

¶10. (SBU) PolOff noted that one apparent weakness in the TIP detection and enforcement system in Vietnam was the apparent ease with which traffickers could obtain passports for women. Viet acknowledged that MPS is conducting an internal review of its TIP detection and interdiction efforts. He promised to share the results of that review as well as the outcome of the expanded investigation into the Malaysian trafficking ring. Viet highlighted ongoing cooperation efforts with the Dutch, Australian and French governments. He said MPS wants to nurture a channel of cooperation with the USG to jointly combat TIP.

¶11. (SBU) Comment: Our lengthy and detailed discussion on TIP -- and the promise of greater cooperation to come -- was the warmest reception that we have ever received from the MPS in HCMC. We will seek to build on this opening, which could lead to expanded opportunities to assist Vietnamese authorities in combating TIP, an issue of increasing concern -- and action -- for police and government officials in HCMC and the Mekong Delta. End Comment.
WINNICK